

Thailand: We're Ready for Reds



VIET NAM ACTION ... John Harris (left), war correspondent for The Journal-American and Hearst Headline Service, gets firsthand demonstration of U. S. artillery in action from Lt. Jim Crain near Cambodian border.

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American servicemen here are Air Force personnel. They are in what is guardedly called "tactical" and "air defense" components. They fly and

service C-130 and C-47 transport planes, in addition to the supersonic F-105 and other aircraft.

It also is reliably reported that the Air Force's semi-secret F-5, an aircraft specially designed for use in Southeast Asia, is to be supplied to the Thai air force. American officials did not confirm or deny the report, but admitted that such a move is "under consideration."

In addition, American officials made no comment on reports that U.S. Air Force planes are also flying combat missions from Thailand against Pathet Lao guerrillas in Laos, although this is authoritatively believed to be true.

Military activity in Thailand, in effect, is marked by the mysterious, James Bond-like characteristics of many operations in Southeast Asia today. To say that there is more going on in the region than meets the eye is to utter a classic understatement.

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BANGKOK, Thailand, Dec. 4. — Twelve thousand American servicemen are now stationed in this outwardly serene country and their organization is geared to expand swiftly into a major, Viet Nam-style military operation.

Moreover, it is accepted knowledge that American F-105 fighter-bombers are attacking North Viet Nam from bases in Thailand, even though this is denied by the Thai government and is a matter that U.S. officials refuse to discuss.

But a Communist armed threat to strongly pro-West Thailand is growing, and it is no secret that the U.S. has created an elaborate military framework to counter it. U.S. Army engineers are building roads, signalmen are improving communications and some 400 American advisers are working with the Thai armed forces.

IF GRAB IS TRIED

In short, if communism makes a grab for Thailand, it will face a command setup designed to meet exactly that eventuality and based on years of experience, trial and error in South Viet Nam, an hour's jet ride away.

The U.S. commander in Thailand is a former chief of staff of the Military Assistance Command in South Viet Nam. He is Maj. Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, holder of numerous combat decorations and a former member of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Discussions here with Thai and American officials reveal that rising Communist activity in Thailand and adjacent areas is adding a note of urgency to these preparations.

COMMUNISTS ACTIVE

Within the past few years Thai police have smashed six underground organizations aiming at Communist seizure of the country. But the Vietnamese Communist Party, now directed from Hanoi, has been active in Thailand since 1927 and remains so.

Persistent uneasiness in remote regions is now resulting in stepped-up Thai patrol

activity. The Communist Pathet Lao

the Viet Cong of adjacent Laos —continues to achieve military success, creating a major security problem on Thailand's northern and northeastern frontiers. Communist terrorists in the south, on the Malaysian border, have never been entirely eliminated.

But most serious of all—from the Thai and U.S.-South Viet Nam viewpoint—is the question of neighboring Cambodia. Under the rule of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia has become a close ally of Peking—and today the traveler can see Soviet-built MIG fighter planes lined up on the airfield at Phnom Penh, capital of Cambodia.

Cambodia is the principal route of infiltration into South Viet Nam for the North Vietnamese army, now heavily engaged by U.S. troops. This fact alone is a subject of bitter recrimination in Bangkok.

Thailand's Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman recently hinted at "retaliation" if Cambodia continued to permit this passage of troops, but did not say what form this would take.